

INSIDE GRUNDY COUNTY
By Bill Arndorfer
Grundy County Extension Education Director
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Poinsettias are a common sight around the holidays. While people enjoy the beauty of the plant they often mistakenly believe that they are poisonous. If you believe this, you are not alone. The question "Do you think poinsettias are poisonous?" was asked of 1000 Americans by the Society of American Florists in 1993. Fifty three percent incorrectly believed that the plant is poisonous to humans and animals. Surprisingly, 52% of the floral clerks surveyed also believed that poinsettias are poisonous.

While many older books list the poinsettia as poisonous, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and others have been unable to find substantial evidence that anyone has ever died from eating poinsettias. With the millions of plants sold yearly, surely someone would have developed severe problems if the plants were poisonous. Further research, done at Ohio State University using rats, again showed no toxicity symptoms. These animals were fed amounts equivalent to one to five percent of their bodyweight. These levels would be equivalent to a 150 pound person eating one and a half to seven and a half pounds of poinsettia. Researchers also analyzed the leaves, bracts, stems and milky sap for chemicals commonly considered toxic. None were found.

Even though the poinsettia is not poisonous, it can result in problems for some people. The milky sap can cause an allergic reaction which results in skin irritations. The poinsettia tastes bitter and should still be kept out of the reach of curious children and pets. However, this is the same precaution that should be taken with other plants in the home.

One holiday plant does require concern. Mistletoe is widely used indoors during the holiday season. The berries contain beta-phenylethylamine and tyramine (there's a good trivia question), two amines known to be toxic. Ingestion of the berries causes acute stomach and intestinal irritation, cardiovascular collapse, and even death. Keep berries out of the reach of children and pets. Holly berries are considered dangerous for children because they can cause vomiting, diarrhea, and stupor when eaten in quantity. In many cases, when holly is purchased for indoor use, the berries are removed and may be replaced with artificial ones.

An interesting side note of mistletoe is that it is a parasite of several species of trees in the southeastern and western U.S. Mistletoe does not have roots to take up water and mineral nutrients. Instead, it has root-like projections called haustoria that penetrate the water-conducting tissues of a living tree. The mistletoe 'steals' water and minerals from the host tree. Because of this, mistletoe is sometimes called "vampire plant". Think about the next time you 'steal' a kiss under the mistletoe!

The holiday season is filled with the enjoyment of many traditional plants. Use caution with poisonous plants and help spread the good word about the poinsettia. For more information, contact the Grundy office of ISU Extension at 319-824-6979.